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ABSTRACT

Social cognition refers to that ability which makes it possible for one to infer another's covert, inner psychological experiences and to interact with that individual accordingly (Shantz 1975; Flavell 1977). Piaget (1926) maintains that the ability to decenter socially and to take into account the perspective of another develops gradually as the child interacts over time with more and more people in different situations. The result is that the child's speech is highly egocentric until the age of seven or eight. Vygotsky (1962), on the other hand, believes that speech is essentially social in nature at the beginning and that egocentric and social speech are interrelated, with egocentric speech having a social quality and social speech an egocentric potential. The purpose of this study is to compare the views of Piaget and Vygotsky on the development of communicative and egocentric speech in children and to consider their conclusions in light of spontaneous speech data of children 4-8 years old. After considering the strengths of the models offered by Piaget and Vygotsky, a model of the development and differentiation of egocentric and communicative speech is presented. The theoretical basis for the proposed model is discussed and illustrated with examples taken from the spontaneous speech samples collected. (Author/CLK)

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# THE EMERGENCE OF DECENTRATION IN CHILDREN'S SOCIAL SPEECH

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Social cognition refers to that ability which makes it possible for us to infer another's covert, inner psychological experiences and to interact with that individual accordingly (Shantz 1975; Flavell 1977). Piaget (1926) maintains that the ability to decenter socially and to take into account the perspective of another develops gradually as the child interacts over time with more and more people in different situations. The result is that the child's speech is highly egocentric until the age of seven or eight. Vygotsky (1962), on the other hand, believed that speech is essentially social in nature at the beginning and that egocentric and social speech are interrelated with egocentric speech having a social quality and social speech an egocentric potential. Our purpose here is to compare the views of Piaget and Vygotsky on the development of communicative and egocentric speech in children and to consider their conclusions in light of spontaneous speech data of children 4-8 years old. After taking what we consider to be the strengths of the models offered by Piaget and Vygotsky, we have developed our own model of the development and differentiation of egocentric and communicative speech. The theoretical basis for our proposed model will be discussed and illustrated with examples taken from the spontaneous speech samples we have collected.

Piaget's model of the developmental scheme of social speech may be depicted as follows:

Presocial Speech → Egocentric Speech → Socialized Speech

We believe that a major strength of Piaget's theory lies in his concept of egocentric speech. Piaget maintains that because of the young child's egocentric nature in both social and impersonal cognition, his speech centers on himself and "confusion results in the primacy of the child's own point of view" (Piaget 1967). In this view, the child younger than seven or eight is inadequate in his communication even when he intends to communicate. While social speech before seven may have qualities of egocentricity, it would seem logical that the descriptors of egocentric social speech would be different from those defining pure egocentric speech. We find two weaknesses in the above model:

1) Piaget's model implies that all of speech is egocentric at a given stage. His own research, however, shows that probably not more than 40% of the child's speech is solely egocentric even during his most egocentric stage.

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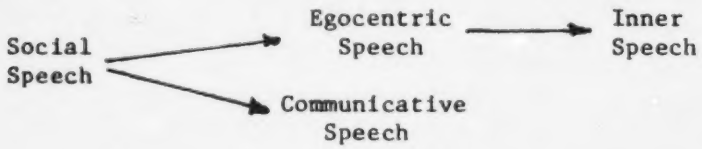
2) Egocentric speech dies out as social speech develops. The two appear to be mutually exclusive in Piaget's model.

Vygotsky's view of developing social speech is somewhat different.




The major strengths of Vygotsky's model are the following:

1) The origin of speech is social, i.e., there is an early desire on the part of the child to initiate or maintain social contact through speech.

2) Communicative speech and egocentric speech are not mutually exclusive but can exist together.

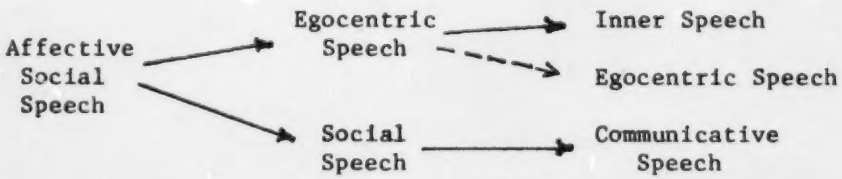
3) Egocentric speech does not die but becomes internalized as verbal thought.

In addition to these strengths, we believe there are weaknesses in Vygotsky's model:

1) There is an implication that communicative speech appears at the same time that egocentric speech is still verbal. We believe, however, that communicative speech does not develop this soon. Between the ages of 3 to 8, the child's social speech is not truly communicative in all respects.

2) Egocentric speech disappears except in its internal form. We believe that even as adults we may occasionally verbalize egocentric speech in the presence of others.

After considering the strengths and weaknesses of the models proposed by Piaget and Vygotsky, we posit the following model of developing social communicative speech:



1) Affective Social Speech. The early language of the very young child is social in intent in that the child employs it to make contact with a receiver in the environment. Its success, however, is more appropriately measured in the affective realm than in the cognitive.

2) Egocentric Speech. Much like Piaget and Vygotsky, we define egocentric speech as that speech of the child for himself which reflects the child's inability to appreciate the points of view of his listeners. It may serve several functions including self-direction, language practice, activity accompaniment, and social contact. This form of speech later becomes the inner speech of verbal thought. As our model shows, however, egocentric speech may not disappear entirely in its oral form as both Piaget and Vygotsky theorize. We agree with John Flavell (1977) that we are "at risk" for egocentric thinking and speech all of our lives.

3) Social Speech. This speech has strong social intent but varying degrees of success in relation to the child's ability to take the perspective of his receiver into account. The speech is social in intent but egocentric in delivery. One evidence of this stage may be seen in limitations in the number of receivers the speaker can consider at any given time.

4) Communicative Speech. At this highest stage of development, speech takes into account the total audience and shows a high degree of adaptation to the perspectives and needs of the audience.

We are most interested in the transition from social to communicative speech. We believe that social will and cognitive skill develop and interact to varying degrees during this transition. We propose that one characteristic of emerging social decentration is the child's increasing ability to interact with more than one person at a time. In this view, social will is extended to a wider field as the child begins to include more people into his audience and his focus of attention increases from a one-to-one to a one-to-many type of interaction.

As his social will to communicate increases, so does the child's cognitive skill to effectively verbalize his message. This, of course, assumes that the child's language has developed within some normal range. At first, the young child has difficulty producing the appropriate speech for his audience's needs, and this mismatch between desire and ability may become evident to him as he decenters enough to read his listeners' feedback. With his increased social will to communicate, the child strives to suit his linguistic performance to his perception of his audience's needs. As the child decenters, his social will and

cognitive skill develop and interact and his speech becomes truly communicative. Thus, the emergence of decentration in children's social speech marks the development of increased cognitive skill as social will expands, eventually culminating in communicative speech.

One way to get at the ability of children of different ages to demonstrate communicative speech is to place them in a context that requires social adaptation and observe their spontaneous language response in that setting. We have begun a study of 108 children, 4-8 years old, in a setting which, ideally, requires a high degree of social cognitive skill. The context in which speech samples have been recorded is the closest thing to a public speaking experience one is likely to find in the kindergarten and first and second grades. The activity, variously called talking-time, news-time, or sharing-time, is a one-to-many activity in which a child is invited to come before his teacher and classmates to talk about something of interest to him and, presumably, to the audience. Thirty sessions of from twenty to thirty minutes have been recorded, with an average of three talks recorded for each of the younger children and two talks for each of the older subjects.

Children between the ages of 4 and 8 were chosen for the study because prior research and theorizing suggest that this period is a critical one in the development of social cognition. The activity we have chosen allows us to consider both the child speaker's adaptation to feedback from his audience and the peer audience's response to the speaker and his message.

Our preliminary study shows two major steps in the transition from social speech to communicative speech. Both stages will be described and illustrated by examples taken from the speech samples of the children studied. Although limited quantitative analysis of the speech data has been made at this time, the qualitative findings tend to support our tentative model of the acquisition of communicative speech. While any of the behaviors reported here may be present to a degree at all of the ages studied, Stage I speech appears to be much more common in the 52-75 months age group and Stage II speech at 76-99 months. At this time, any assignment of age to stage is somewhat arbitrary.

STAGE I. (52-75 months)

The subjects in Stage I have apparently decentered very little, and it is hypothesized that:

1) The children will exhibit a limited scope of social will by focusing their speech upon their teacher on a one-to-one basis.

2) The children will display limited cognitive skill as sensitive speakers or listeners.

Social Will. The kindergarteners in the study are not reluctant to appear before the class to speak, but once they get to that coveted spot near the teacher, their speech is usually directed toward only the teacher. A typical discourse consists of a short, barely audible statement followed by a round of "twenty questions" with the teacher as the grand inquisitor. For example, when Blossom talks about her doll, the discourse is essentially a dialogue between Blossom and the teacher.

Blossom: Here's a doll. Her name's Baby Sue.
Teacher: You'll have to talk just a little bit slower so even Bobby back there can hear what you're saying.
Blossom: Baby in the doll corner. Her name's Baby Sue.
Teacher: Yeh.
Child: What?
Teacher: Something else about Baby Sue. What can Baby Sue do?
Blossom: You can pull her scalp up.
Teacher: You can pull what?
Blossom: Her hair. It's in her scalp.

This one-to-one dialogue between teacher and child which largely ignores most of the audience is typical of children in our Stage I of communicative speech development. It is interesting that the teacher's comments seem well designed to direct the child's attention to the needs of the audience.

Cognitive Skill. In Stage I of the development from social speech to communicative speech the child is normally inexplicit in reference and insensitive to the needs and feedback of his listeners. He also lacks the basic skills to be a responsible listener. The child is generally deficient in the following four cognitive skill areas suggested by Glucksberg, Krauss, and Higgins (1975):

1) Sensitivity to the referent-nonreferent array. The child between the ages of 3 and 5 has not decentered enough to be able to separate his perspective from those of his listeners. The speaker's referents may be clear to himself but not to his audience.

   This occurs frequently in the speech of the kindergarteners in the present study. For instance, Sharon describes her new bike as being bigger than her brother's which assumes, correctly or incorrectly, that the listeners know how big her brother's bike is. Sometimes the child's referents seem to be clearly identified until the teacher's probing uncovers the disguised antecedents. When Kenny talks about his bike and his Daddy breaking the light on "the bike," only later is it revealed that "the bike" with the broken light is not Kenny's but his father's bike. Such a misuse of the definite article before identifying the referent is a characteristic of egocentric speech in young children (Warden 1976).

2) Sensitivity to the listener and communicative situation. The child at this stage may not have the necessary sensitivity to adapt his speech to his listeners' needs. He may not include enough detail in descriptions to give his audience a hint as to what he is talking about. For example, Mark rambles on and on about "Ole Yeller," and no one but Marc knows what he is trying to say.

The child might also fail to take into account the demands of the communicative situation. He may speak too quickly or softly so that his listeners cannot hear him, or he might not show an object clearly enough for his audience to see. One little girl describes her new outfit to the teacher so softly that the other children complain that they cannot hear her. In a loud voice the girl announces defiantly that she cannot speak any louder than she has been and then reverts back to her barely audible delivery.

3) Sensitivity to the listener's feedback. The child in Stage I will most likely fail to acknowledge his classmates' physical and verbal feedback. Occasionally, a speaker responds to a classmate's interruption if the classmate is persistent enough, but normally the kindergartener listens primarily to the teacher. Amy ignores a friend's question about her doll's hair color, but she readily responds to the teacher's repetition of that question shortly thereafter.

4) Sensitivity of the listener to message inadequacies. The listener must also decenter socially and learn to pay attention to the speaker's message so that he may ask for any necessary clarifications. Often, kindergarteners ignore the speaker entirely. At other times, the listeners might catch the speaker's remark about something which interests them and interject their own personal comments on the topic. When Cindy tells the teacher that she is going to practice diving into bed, the other children perk up and tell how they are going to do the same thing in various ways. In other words, they quickly take the topic for their own, and one hears a collective monologue much in the pattern of Piaget's egocentric collective monologue.

Stage I, then, is typically characterized by limited social will featuring speaker-teacher dialogues and limited cognitive skill as shown in referent confusion, lack of appropriate expansion of language, ignoring audience feedback, and low-relevance responses from listeners. When the child enters Stage II, his social will appears to expand, as does his cognitive skill.

STAGE II. (76-99 months)

At Stage II it is hypothesized that:

1) The children will show more awareness of their audience and will extend their will to communicate beyond a physically close person to one or two in the larger group or to the entire audience.

2) The children will exhibit progressively more sensitivity and skill in their roles as speakers and listeners.

Social Will. In Stage II it is hypothesized that as the child decenters, his awareness of his classmates and his desire to communicate with them will increase. A first grader may extend his focus beyond the teacher to his classmates but continue to interact on a one-to-one basis. For example, when Laurel is constantly interrupted by her classmates, her discourse turns into a "question-answer" period, but now the questions are coming from the class and not just from the teacher.

Laurel: We saw fallen trees and even a tree that had been struck by lightning and was hollow inside of it. There was...
Child: The one across the river you were talking about...?
Laurel: Huh?
Child: Was it the tree across the river?
Laurel: Well, no the tree was struck by lightning, but the tree we crossed was across the river. It had fallen down.
Child: With a hatchet?
Laurel: No, we didn't chop it. We found it like that.

When the child is about seven or eight years old, he may have become aware of the class as a whole and want to share his news with all of his classmates. The second graders in the study display such an inclination to interact on a one-to-many basis. They often go so far as to pass objects they are showing around the room or stand on chairs to show them. Thus, there seems to be a developmental trend toward increasing social will in terms of broadening focus as children become more aware of their audiences and acquire more skill in decentering.

Cognitive Skill. In Stage II, the child's cognitive skill to communicate may still fall short of his social will to do so. This stage typically consists of varying degrees of cognitive skill as the child tests his hypotheses about how to get his messages across to his listeners.

1) Sensitivity to the referent-nonreferent array. The child begins to make his referents clearer as he becomes aware of his listeners' different perspectives. The first and second graders generally

identify their referents as when Bobby tells the class about a trip that he and Eric took to the dump. Bobby uses the name "Eric" five times, the pronoun "we" (standing for Eric and himself) two times, and the pronoun "he" (standing for Eric) does not appear at all.

2) Sensitivity to the listener and communicative situation. As the child decenters enough to be aware of situational demands and has experience in talking to a class, he may be better able to cope with the needs of his listeners. The first and second graders explain more, speak louder, and point out and show what they are talking about. In discussing her desire to get a Blue Bird costume, Debbie not only points to Carol Ann's outfit as an example of one, she also explicitly lists all the parts of the costume in case some of the children cannot see what Carol Ann is wearing.

3) Sensitivity to the listener's feedback. The child develops greater sensitivity to his listeners' feedback as he becomes more decentered. At this stage, the child is so intent upon communicating to that sea of faces before him that he often pays close attention to how the children react to his speech. One girl imitates her caretaker's voice which delights the children who respond with laughter. This reinforces the speaker who continues her performance. Other children often ask the class "Any questions?" in order to get its reaction if they are not satisfied with the amount of feedback they are receiving.

4) Sensitivity of the listener to message inadequacies. By the age of six or seven, the audience is still somewhat egocentric, but their level of cognitive development is such that their comments and questions are usually relevant. The first and second grade listeners seem to pay closer attention to the speaker's message and ask for clarifications if the speaker falsely takes something for granted that is implicit in his speech. When Lee asks Janet whether her cat Sandy or her dog is blind, Janet responds, "Buffer, he almost got blinded because somepin'...." She is interrupted by a child who asks, "Who's Buffer?" since it is not general knowledge that "Buffer" is the name of Janet's dog. The first and second graders appear to have decentered enough to accept their responsibilities as listeners as well as speakers in social speech situations.

The purpose of this paper was to compare the views of Piaget and Vygotsky on the development and differentiation of egocentric and communicative speech and to discuss their conclusions in reference to spontaneous speech data taken from children in the 4-8-year age range. It was hypothesized that although children may have the social will to communicate to others at an early age as Vygotsky posits, their cognitive abilities to decenter and to express themselves appropriately in clear linguistic terms develops slowly to a socially operative level around the age of seven. This latter position is consistent with Piaget's views.

It is our intention to subject this conception of emerging social decentration to further empirical study. It is anticipated that our results will provide additional information concerning the emergence of decentering behavior as evidenced in spontaneous social interaction.